

VZCZCXRO6225
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHMA #1063 3641738
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291738Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY MONROVIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0645
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS MONROVIA 001063

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

PLEASE PASS OPIC FOR JAMIE EKERN AND BARBARA GIBIAN

E.O.12958: N/A
TAGS: [EINV](#) [ECON](#) [OPIC](#) [LI](#)
SUBJECT: LIBERIA: KENDEJA CULTURAL CENTER -- NO PROGRESS

REF A: EKERN-ABBOTT MEMO OF 12/15/08; B) GIBIAN-ABBOTT E-MAIL OF 12/9/08; C) MONROVIA 407

1. (SBU) The RLJ Kendeja Hotel construction is proceeding in anticipation of a March 2009 opening. Ref C reported some of the controversy surrounding the launch of the project, and Ref B requested an update on the status of relocation of the displaced Kendeja cultural center. During a December 16 meeting, the new Assistant Minister for Culture Isaac Jackson told us the Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICAT) has said it is a high priority for the GOL to show progress on the National Cultural Center, planned for Margibi County (past Monrovia's airport) before the RLJ Kendeja hotel opens. Former residents of the Kendeja cultural center and members of the cultural troupe are apparently still in the area around the hotel, "practicing together." However, the GOL has made no progress on relocating the cultural center displaced and it does not sound as if any progress is likely in the foreseeable future.

2. (SBU) Jackson reported he planned to try to visit the new site for the proposed cultural center sometime in December to hire people to "prepare the ground," which he clarified meant to cut the grass. MICAT then plans to erect a fence around the 50-acre site, and hopes companies will purchase advertising spots on the fence to provide MICAT a source of revenue. Jackson, who has been in the job a month, disclaimed any knowledge of incidents that took place before his arrival and invited the Minister's chief of staff Norris Tweah to provide more background.

3. (SBU) Tweah was not sure how much of the money provided by the RLJ companies had been used to buy land and compensate Kendeja residents and how much remained unaccounted for. There do not seem to be any plans to investigate the situation further. MICAT will not be able to take further steps on the cultural center unless it receives additional funding. (Note: Liberia's next fiscal year starts July 1; the next dry season, suitable for construction, starts about October. End note.)

4. (SBU) Comment: There is a shortage of hotel rooms in Monrovia and RLJ Kendeja's opening is much anticipated by the business community. The opening is timed to precede the international Women's Colloquium that is being hosted by the GOL in early March. Although the investment encountered the usual range of obstructions and delays that afflict projects in Liberia, and there are concerns that the project is running behind schedule. There are as yet no competing hotels of comparable quality planned. The planned additional airline service by Delta Airlines, starting next June, should increase the demand for hotels. Per Ref A, we are not aware of any potential ties to terrorism, money laundering, corruption, violations of law associated with the project owners, and do not anticipate changes in currency convertibility or restrictions in transferring remittances out of Liberia.

5. (SBU) Comment continued: President Sirleaf envisions the new cultural center as a nation-building enterprise, drawing students from each county and reviving a national cultural heritage. That said, relocation of the cultural center is a contentious issue and

is low on the list of national poverty reduction priorities. The RLJ Kendeja hotel has created an excellent impression by the jobs it is creating and the manner in which it treats its employees. It is likely that good community relations by the hotel (and increasing employment) will counter lingering resentment over the displaced cultural center. The hotel, along with RLJ's other investments in Liberia, provide a vote of confidence and help convince Liberians their country is, indeed, on the right track.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD